

Meaningful Places?

A case-study of user-driven innovation in a Danish Second Life project: the Library Hangouts

Jensen, Sisse Siggaard

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Meaningful places?

- **a case study of user-driven innovation in a Danish Second Life project: the Library Hangouts.**

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Sisse Siggaard Jensen, associate professor
Department for Communication, Business, and Information Technologies
Roskilde University, P. O. Box 260, DK-4000 Roskilde
sisse@ruc.dk, <http://worlds.ruc.dk/>
+45 4674 3771, +45 2092 6094

Abstract

“The Library Hangouts” is a Danish Second Life library project. Participatory observation and video-interviews is applied to the study of the Hangouts’ case, which was followed from the start to the closing of the project. In the present paper a distinction between space and place is introduced in order to understand some of the problems experienced by the actors of the project. The distinction between space and place accentuates the importance of second order observation meaning that the interplay between the abstract space, i.e. the Second Life grid and design, and the contextual places meaningful to the residents, i.e. the Hangouts project, have to be taken into consideration, if we are to interpret and analyse virtual world practices and activity. The case study raises a question to be dealt with in our future research: how do we deal with the potential contradiction between on the one hand the user-driven open content creation of a virtual world such as Second Life and on the other hand the control necessary to help maintain trust and credibility?

Key words

Virtual world, Second Life, user-driven innovation, library, space and place, trust, credibility, control, case study, participatory observation, video-interviews, second order observation.

Introduction

In this paper, case based observation from the ongoing research project “Sense-making strategies and the user-driven innovations in virtual worlds, 2008-2011” (<http://worlds.ruc.dk/>) are presented. At the time of writing several cases have been followed among others the “Library Hangouts” project – a Second Life case. Libraries are public institutions with societal obligations as to general education in society. As such they are worthwhile following when they move into the virtual world of Second Life. Presenting some of the observations from this case study we will, however, first reflect on the Second Life context in general, because it sets the framework and the conditions for the design and agency of the cases.

User-driven innovation

The general idea that guides the Linden Lab design of Second Life is the user-driven creation of the virtual world’s content – be it buildings, islands, environments, eco-systems, virtual products for sale, events, meeting places or other kinds of agency and virtual artefacts; the Linden Lab vision being that the general framing should deliver only the tools for such user-driven agency and innovation. Tools that help the residents create their own content and world with none of the usual limitations in the other life world.

Underlying this idea is the pre-understanding of users and user-driven agency that given the tools then the creativity and vision of the users – the Second Life residents – will unfold whereby the design of creative places will supply the interesting content of the world. In this way, the designing idea and strategy of the Second Life virtual world may be characterized as rather daring. As opposed to the role-playing games in which not only the framing and the tools are delivered but also the template and plots for the role-playing agency, the Linden Lab project and the Second Life grid to a great extent has to rely on the user-driven creativity and innovation. Also, part of the original vision is a democratic ideal of an open virtual space in which residents can create their own world (Au 2008; Boellstorff 2008). Thus, it has been left open to the residents of the world to consider and resolve which agencies that are relevant to the virtual world and to create a design that make into a reality such considerations.

In other words, you may say that in Second Life, observation is a “second order observation” – a sort of double-layeredness – in the sense that you will have to take into consideration the general framework that delivers the tools for creativity as well as the creation of the many specific agencies by the means of those tools.

Abstract grid and contextual place

The double-layeredness of second order observation accentuates a discussion of the notions of space and place in Second Life. Following this, we will argue that Second Life is best understood, if we distinguish between the two notions of respectively place and space. The difference being that space (chora) may be seen as the abstract pinpointing of positions on a geometric or cartographic grid, whereas places (topos) are concrete and meaningful contexts that frame human interaction and

agency (Rämö 1999). Thus, cyberspace denotes the abstract space, whereas virtual place is a contextual framing of virtual being. This distinction may be applied to the understanding of the relation between the overall geometric and cartographic grid, created by the Linden Lab company, and the specific contexts, or places, created by the residents of the world.

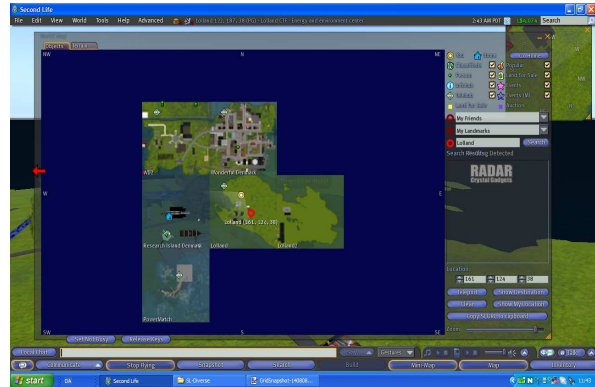
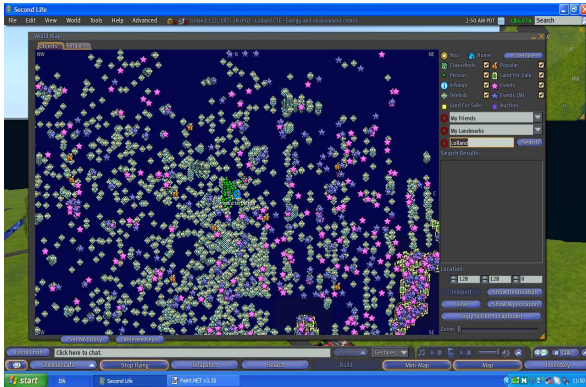


Figure 1 & 2. Zooming in from the abstract space and approaching six islands in a Danish cluster, i.e. Wonderful Denmark 1 & 2, Lolland, Power Match, and Research Island Denmark.

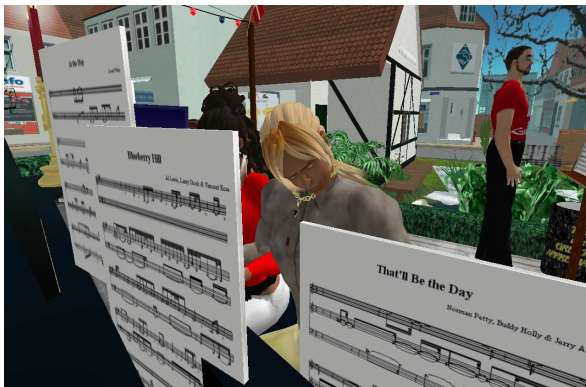


Figure 3 & 4: Listening to music and dancing. The Old Garden of Wonderful Denmark – a framework and contextual place staging human intercourse and virtual being.

In his recent book Tom Boellstorff (2008) considers the impact of the “place” metaphor on virtual worlds in general, and, in particular, on Second Life.

“ [...] place, above all else, makes virtual worlds what they are: they may simulate abstractions of reality; they may be operated as a service; creating them may be an art; people may visit them to play games. Ultimately, though, they’re just a set of locations [...]. Even the term “resident” underscores how “a sense of place” is fundamental to Second Life.” (Boellstorff 2008: 91)

At the moment of writing, it is difficult to estimate how many places there are in Second Life and with that the amounts of land parcels on the mainland, and the thousands of islands and regions that

together make the world. By August 2006, Boellstorff (2008) estimates that over half of Second Life islands were arranged in medium-sized landmasses and regions, meaning, that there is a development towards larger landscapes and sceneries. This development is probably best understood if it is conceived as the residents' request for control with their places and landscapes; control that is made possible by the ownership of an island. Apparently, user-driven control of places be they tenancies or ownerships is a prevailing tendency in the development of the world from the early introduction of the Linden Lab mainland to the current map with thousands of islands and regions (see also, Au 2008). This tendency is phrased by the avatar Doctor Asp – the owner of the island “Wonderful Denmark” – in this way:

“We have bought an island in order to have everything under control. Our business is serious, so we have to avoid that the surrounding landscape looks awful [*ssj, reference is made to the Linden Lab mainland, ssj*].” Doctor Asp (Jensen 2008: 44)

Doctor Asp is a Danish Second Life entrepreneur and virtual estate agent. The Second Life business supports and provides for his means of living. The many fragmented and pointless examples of design at the Linden Lab mainland of Second Life are regarded almost with contempt by Doctor Asp. To run a serious business, it is necessary for him to distance his agency from the general impression that you get, if travelling around the SL mainland. Otherwise, his customers will be disappointed when they enter the virtual world to encounter a mess of pointless places and unattractive design. In his view, most of the user-driven innovations and creations of the mainland are pointless and they make no sense; rather, they may discourage his customers thus threatening his business. You may say that in this case, the overall design idea of Linden Lab's virtual world generates problems, if you are running a serious business. It seems that problems arise when the idea of user-driven content creation is to be made a reality thus resulting in the tendency towards control rather than co-design in an open and ever expanding world.

In the “Library Hangouts” case, the project team faces problems similar to those reported by Doctor Asp, as it will appear in the case study findings presented below.

Research problem and question

In the context of the project about user-driven innovation and sense-making strategies, user driven innovation is understood as the meaning-generating and sense-making strategies of innovative *practices*. If we accept the distinction between space and place – and with that the second order observation of the Second Life world – then we may argue that design in Second Life denotes the processes whereby the users, the residents, make meaningful the geometric grid of Second Life as they turn the grid into places for Second Life residents' intercourse, being and agency. Again, if we accept this understanding of design processes, then it seems likely that a problem comes up that has to be dealt with. Gapinesses evolve, because, to design a place, particularly so an island, it is a very complex and difficult task, if the place is to make sense to the other residents of the world. To create meaningful design is a skilled craft – or art – that, ideally speaking, takes professional knowledge with regard to construction, design idea, craft, animation and scripting. In other words, designing a place or an island takes complex meaning-generating processes that require vision, innovation, and highly skilled competences. Potentially, a problem may evolve between on the one

hand the idea of the open and user-driven co-design that transform the abstract grid into contextual places, and, on the other hand, the user-driven design of places given that such design is to be meaningful to other residents. The question is, if and how the creators of the projects and places under study have dealt with the question of how to create a design meaningful to other residents, and, if and how they have experienced the possible problem such as phrased above.

Considering this understanding of design processes, it makes sense to analyse Second Life design and agency only if it involves the interplay between the abstract grid and the contextual places. Thus, in the following, we will draw on a case study of a place and project, i.e. the Library Hangouts, but first we will briefly introduce the methods that have been applied to this case study.

Research methods applied

Above, we stated that virtual and innovative *practices* are of a pivotal importance and interest to our Second Life case study. The method of participatory observation is one among others relevant to the study of practices. Thus, participatory observations together with in-depth video-interviews are the prevailing methods applied to the Library Hangouts case.

The Hangouts have been followed in depth in participatory observations carried out at their place in Second Life combined with active participation in the planning of Second Life events arranged for together with the project team, and in video-interviews carried out at the project team's work place. The case has been followed in the cycle of their 'life time' and with regard to their practices from the start to the closing of the project.

The in-depth video-interviews – in situ – have enabled us to follow the project members as they move back and forth between the virtual worlds and their other life world, i.e. their work life. With a handheld camera, the participants of the video-interviews have been followed “into” their virtual place – in live pictures of their screens – while they act online, and, simultaneously, offline discuss their interaction and agency, as we together move along. The method of simultaneously acting online while discussing and interpreting the actions offline has been developed during the last fifteen years of studying networked communication, and especially so, during the study of virtual worlds since 2002 (Jensen 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008b).

Observing the place, concurrently, in-world snapshots have been taken, and written notes have been attached to the snapshots.

Library Hangouts: a Second Life case study

The majority of Danish residents, and projects, moved into Second Life at the beginning of 2007, and over springtime. It was the media coverage of Second Life issues in 2007 that awoke the curiosity of the manager of the library's development projects. Immediate action was taken and a Second Life project team was established almost the day after the project manager had taken notice of the Second Life world due to the media coverage. Therefore, the project got public mention as they were some of the first movers among the Danish public institutions in Second Life. Early in 2007 they started out to transform the abstract Second Life grid in order to turn it into a contextual place meaningful to other residents of the world.

Animated chairs and meditation bobbles

Visiting the Hangouts' place for the first time, strikingly, there were no buildings neither offices or assembly halls nor neatly arranged gardens or a charming tropical paradise. A wall with the inscription "Library Hangouts", some pillows to sit on, chairs, and an open plateau constituted the main part of the place. With brief intervals, the place was observed. It turned out that a group of librarian avatars met on a regular basis to discuss questions with regard to their profession. Libraries are public institutions with obligations as to general education and the question discussed was, if Second Life has a part to play in this, and if so, how best to play that part. Apparently, the project team's idea was to make the Hangouts place a *meeting place* for discussion of professional and serious matters.

"Really, when we started out, the question, we asked, was: what makes sense and fascinate the residents of this world? What is funny about the world? Quickly we realized that being together, meeting other avatars, chatting, controlling and using the virtual figure and designing it, all of this made sense and fascinated many residents. So, we focused our attention on these aspects of living the second life. It made no sense to introduce our traditional services from the library's homepage to make them accessible in this new environment. Our point of departure was to create something new, preferably, a virtual staging or framing for avatars in which to meet with each other." *Mads*

"Some of the really useful library services accessible in real life, they are of no interest if you enter into this world. In here, you would expect some sort of experience or something funny. Well, I don't know how funny our place is (*ssj, Janne is laughing*), but at least we are experimenting." *Janne*

The design was gradually developed over time, spontaneously, and in some cases together with occasional visitors. Designing the place together, the team experienced and also experimented with what it "felt" and looked like. An animated chair with a script that rezzed a new chair each time a newcomer joined in was bought. Automatically, the script adjusted the new chair to a meeting circle. The animated feature of the chair had great effect, as I experienced, when joining in one of their meetings. The chair made me feel welcome and not intrusive.

Sensuous, almost magical and fantastic experiences were also part of the purpose in the design of the place. Meditation bobbles with relaxing and psychedelic music were created, and again, they were created in a process of mutual experience. Events and arrangements were organized, and audio books made available.

"We call them meditation bobbles. Inside the bobbles, you can sit down and listen to music while meditating; looking at flying fish and ladybirds." *Mads*

"I think it is really cool to include 'bling' in here (*ssj, the meditation bobbles*). Something funny that creates a cool experience. If I turn on the music in here, then an almost psychedelic experience evolves, a kind of out of body all-embracing experience as if taking drugs. It is the same experience thing that you get when reading a book or watching a

movie. This experience thing may be the link between what we do in here and the library's services out there. At least something that is not about hardcore information." *Janne*

The initial idea was to create a place open to the concurrent co-design together with other residents and not only to the members of the project team. A design idea that had to be given up as it, apparently, resulted in chaotic and pointless design.

"Initially, the idea was to let people build and try out things on our place, furnishing the place. But, little by little, we had to give it up, because it messed up the place, and, actually, not many residents did create something serious." *Mads*

Located on the mainland of Second Life, the Hangouts learned – in the hard way – that the surrounding places and the landscape had an impact on their place and activity. The project's place was fenced in by neighbours, who built tall walls that hindered the entrance to their place.

"Brandts (*ssj, one of the project's neighbours*) bought an island, because they were in need of more space. So, we promptly bought their land. We wanted to ensure some space around our place. Our neighbours, Brandts, had built a three floor building with grey walls towards our place. Due to this, we had to rearrange our place." *Mads*

The project, however, stayed on the mainland. They did not buy an island as they found it more likely that occasional visitors might pass by on the mainland, possibly, to engage in their debate about the libraries and Second Life.

Over time, as mentioned above, it turned out that their visitors primarily were librarians, and students. Thus, the target group of their project gradually changed from being the public to becoming some of the professionals from their own field.

The project was closed over summer as one of the team members employed in a temporary position was not reappointed due to lack of resources.

Concluding remarks

The vision and the idea of the Hangouts' project was to design an open place for visitors and residents to create virtual artefacts, clothes, architecture and also to arrange for events and cultural experiences – all of this in mutual agency. No plan was made, and no designing firms were contacted to create and build the virtual place. Rather, a creative and mutual designing process in itself was part of the purpose. This approach to design may be characterized as "participatory designing in a mutual and collaborative practice" – and in an explorative process. Metaphorically speaking, the place was designed out of animated chairs and meditation bobbles rather than offices and main buildings. Neither the web based services of the library nor the more traditional ones were included in the virtual world. It made no sense to the project's team members.

However, the vision was confronted with the conditions set by the Linden Lab grid. To take full control of the virtual place requires the ownership of an island which was out of reach for the project. Gradually, the building rights were privileged as it turned out that the open co-design approach in many cases entailed pointless design, if not disruptive. Thus, it appeared that the abstract grid had a decisive impact on the actualisation of the project's vision and practice in the design of a contextual place.

Over time, the place developed into a meeting place with a group of regular visitors, and as such, it was very successful in initiating a debate – at times a very critical debate – about the role of libraries in Second Life; a debate which was also part of the purpose. Yet it turned out to be a debate not with the public and with that the end users of the library, rather, it was a debate in a somewhat closed meeting circle of professionals of the field. Visiting the place, it was difficult to see and visualize the purposes and activity of the place. Only because of returning visits with brief intervals was it possible to get the point, if you were outside of the meeting circle and the profession.

The open and democratic ideal seems to generate problems for the Wonderful Denmark case as well as the Library Hangouts' project. In business and for public institutions, credibility and trust are important qualities. Pointless and unattractive design does not visualize such qualities. Thus, openness turned into control in the business case. In the Hangouts' case lack of control turned out to be a problem, when neighbours fenced-in the project's place surrounding it with a grey wall. Also, the co-design vision had to be given up as building rights became privileged.

Thus, the case-study raises the question of how to handle the possible gapinesses between on the one hand the vision of user-driven collaboration, exploration and co-design and on the other hand the possibility of maintaining the control and orderliness necessary for serious business and agency to appear trustworthy and credible. In the Library Hangouts' project, profoundly, the original vision and purpose was altered, when confronted with the tools put at their disposal by the abstract grid. So, it seems that the idea of the user-driven content creation and design is difficult to make into a reality.

In his latest work, Simon Heilesen (2008) reports from a case study of the Info Island DK, a Second Life project with several Danish libraries. In his work, similar problems have been identified. In continuation of this, we will in our future research deal with this question with regard to the sense-making strategies and the user-driven innovations in virtual worlds.

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